

Transcription: J.R. Collins

Today is Friday, October 9, 2009. My name is James Crabtree, and I'll be interviewing Mr. J.R. Collins. This interview is taking place at the William Courtney Veterans Home in Temple, Texas, and it is in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time today to let us interview you.

J.R. Collins: Your welcome.

I guess usually the best place to start is tell us a little bit about what your childhood was like and what you were doing up until when you went into the military.

J.R. Collins: Well, I was raised in Arkansas. My dad died when I was about 3 or 4 years old. My mother remarried, and I grew up in Arkansas, down around close to Prescott, Camden, and Hope, out in the country, and all of my relatives it seems like – my uncles and so on and dad, both dad and stepdad, and all of my brothers – worked in oil fields. I'm the only one that never spent a single day or earned a dollar as an employee in the oil fields. I went into the Navy at age 17. I was living with one of my aunts and uncles, my mother's older sister, and was going to school over at Weathersfield, Arkansas. When the war broke out, I was living with them and being just a student, youngster in school. I worked the farm. They had some farmland there. They had moved out to this farm. And I remember following my mule across the field plowing and seeing the airplanes come over because the war had broken out in the winter, and this was in the summer, and I thought, man, I would like to be a tail gunner. I saw those planes with the bubble on the back and this gun sticking out, and so I hitchhiked to El Dorado where they had a recruiting office, went down in this building that had the offices, and I walked down to the Army recruiting office, and they said "closed today, be back tomorrow" sign on the door. So I walked back up the hall and I looked in the door there at the Marine recruiting office, and I saw those guys with their dress clothes on, and you know how those collars were and everything, and I looked in there and they were pretty stiff-necked, and I said nah, this is not for me, and walked down the hallway a little bit and stuck my head in the Navy recruiting office, and I saw the people in there. They were laughing and talking, had their feet on the desk, and I said I guess this is the place I ought to go in. So I joined the Navy.

And what year was this, 1942?

J.R. Collins: Yes, in the summer of '42, July.

Did you have to get permission from your aunt and uncle, sign the paperwork for you to go in at 17?

J.R. Collins: I lied about my age.

Really -

J.R. Collins: So I hitchhiked a long ways down there to El Dorado from where I lived out in the country.

So your family didn't know you were going, did they?

J.R. Collins: Oh no, this was an era in which my family did not know a lot of the things I was doing like this, decisions that I would make.

Yeah.

J.R. Collins: And I was the oldest of 7 kids, and so my mother was busy with the children and I was kind of left on my own. I worked for my uncle and aunt and went to school, and it was a time when I didn't even realize I needed anybody else's help in making decisions. So my career in the military in the Navy was something that is probably a lot different than the people you normally interview. This changed a whole life pattern for me. I never saw a Japanese person except I saw a prisoner one time on a ship. I was never shot at. I never had to dodge bombs, though we did have a bomb shelter there. I wound up being in the Solomon Islands, but the main thing about this was when I went into the Navy, they tested our IQ's, and it just so happened that though I only went through the 9th grade, my IQ was high. They had commissioned the faculty at Cal Tech to develop submarine underwater detection equipment to protect harbors, and I was in the first class that went to the school that they had put together to operate this equipment in the harbors.

And where was the school held?

J.R. Collins: It was in San Pedro. It was a naval base there in San Pedro, and this was in late '42. It was after I went to boot camp. Then I went, actually it was a harbor defense rating that I got, it was a new rating, and nobody really knew what we were and they were shipping me around. I went up to Oregon and Washington states, up there, and they didn't know where to send us. They give us all kind of odd jobs to do. I remember one time working on one of the battleships that they brought back from Pearl Harbor, and I remember being in the double bilge chipping rust off. Anyway, finally they sent us to the South Pacific. I went to Noumea New Caledonia, which was a French colony, and was there a little while, and then they sent us up to just north of Guadalcanal on the Solomon Islands, and we put our equipment established in the harbor defense place there because there was shipping coming in and out, and we had to keep Japanese submarines out of there because our ships would come in and anchor, and they depended on us to keep 'em protected. So we had our equipment in the harbor entrances. There was about three entrances that we had to protect, or maybe four. Anyway, I spent my time there. I studied electronics. That's one, the Cal Tech, it was there, it was that group of people. That put me into a situation that was different from all of my family working in the oil field, so I learned this when I went to school. I guess I must've been a good student because I made good grades even there at the naval school. I then wound up down in Noumea New Caledonia, and then gone up to Solomon, and we put our stuff in here and that's where I spent most of my overseas war time. I never got a shot. I remember one time they said a Japanese plane was flying over. I think it was an observer. Anyway, we did however, we had a group of sub chasers. They were from Australia I think. They came and worked with us up here, and they were stationed over here and they would get a signal from us at any time, and we had a contact. We sent them out and they had equipment on their ships. We'd keep 'em out. The Japanese was pretty, apparently was pretty sharp in a lot of this because before they war they must've gone in and plotted a lot of these islands because they would go under a shelf to get out, get away from us, but we never had one to get in our harbor. We kept 'em out. And then when I came back from service and was discharged after the war, I went to school in Kansas City to study electronics, got a high school diploma GED, and went to school there in Kansas City and studied electronics to build and maintain radio and TV stations. I got first class Federal Communications license to do this. And so I got a job out in New Mexico for this and then I moved to Amarillo

and helped build a new radio station there. This was in the infancy of the TV stuff. And so it was very interesting which there were very few TV stations and your older experienced engineers got those jobs. This is where I came in the thing. Then being in Amarillo, I changed my profession. I started going to church. My wife told me we had a new baby that was coming on the way, and she was born and about three months old, and my wife says we're going to start taking this baby to church. Well we did, and I got involved with this, and I went to college over in Tennessee to become a minister. I preached at smaller towns, had little radio stations in them, and every place I preached seemed like they needed a licensed engineer to qualify them to stay on the air even because the Federal Communications Commission would not let them stay there. So I would go and hang my license up with them and make a deal with them to have a 15-minute radio program for me, and pay me some and give me this. So the first place I went was in Kozesco, Mississippi, and I had a program right after Paul Harvey news.

Oh wow, that is something else.

J.R. Collins: So Paul Harvey news came on and then I came on for 15 minutes, and I moved into Oklahoma and then wound up being in Texas.

So you did radio that whole time.

J.R. Collins: Yes, in most of those places, I'd hang my license up, and in Lampasas down here where I am now, I had went there and that old boy said oh, I'm glad to see you, and we cut a deal there, too, and so over the years, I maintained my license, but it eventually got to the point that I let my license lapse. But while I was up in the Panhandle at Perryton, Texas, my wife came down with, she got a malignant brain tumor and she was an invalid for three years and I have to give up the ministry there, and I went to selling specialty advertising. I'd go out in the day time and have a lady come in and help her, stay with her while I went out and I had a friend that introduced me to this thing, so calendars, pens, pencils, anything you see that had advertising on it like your pen here, I sold it, and I sold the high quality stuff as well as the cheap stuff. I'd just go to these towns and I just had a knack for this because I began to make pretty good money in this, and then after my wife died, I remarried a lady here that I'd known when I was living in Lampasas, when I came down here to visit and met her again. Well, her husband had been dead for about 8 years, so she and I got married and we've been married now for 30 years.

That's great.

J.R. Collins: And anyway, I had started when I moved down here I began to work selling insurance with the Farm Bureau. I became a manager for the agency over in Burnett until I retired. So I retired and we moved back to Lampasas where she and her children – she had 5 children and I had 5 children, and they were all grown when we got married. So we got 10 kids between us.

That's a great story. And it's interesting -

J.R. Collins: It had nothing to do with the war.

I know but it's your life story which we appreciate and it's interesting, too, to see how your training in the Navy kind of opened some doors for you into the radio field and where it went from there.

J.R. Collins: As a matter of fact, it just, if it hadn't been for the war, my life would've been totally different. But it introduced me to a field that was a good field and it was pretty much in its infancy because television was coming along then and the development of electronics. I kept up with it for a few years but right now, there's things about electronics that I have no idea how it works anymore. These little cellphones for instance is out of my jurisdiction.

Yeah, so you think if it hadn't been for the war you probably would've ended up working in the oil fields there?

J.R. Collins: Probably, oh yeah.

When you ran off to go enlist, how long had you been thinking about that before you went and did it?

J.R. Collins: About a week.

About a week, yeah.

J.R. Collins: I mean I saw this and I decided to do it and I asked, I did not ask anybody's permission to even go down there. I was the oldest child in the family and mama was busy raising the kids, and I was living around with aunts and uncles. This aunt and uncle that I lived with there had prior to moving on the farm, they had a service station there in town and a little place and I worked there after school hours. I washed cars, pumped gas, fixed flats, and back in the 40s, flats was really, it happened all the time. And I greased cars, changed the oil, and all of this in the summer in there. So I grew up asking no one permission to do anything.

So did you just pack up a small little suitcase with you when you left? When you hitchhiked to El Dorado?

J.R. Collins: Well, no, I just hitchhiked down there.

You didn't have anything else on you?

J.R. Collins: Oh no, I knew I was gonna hitchhike back. I just went down because they didn't -

Just to sign the paperwork.

J.R. Collins: Yeah, get the paperwork, and then they told me where, and they had the tickets for me and all of this.

So did you tell your family before you left for boot camp that you were going?

J.R. Collins: Oh yeah, they knew I was going and they gave me, I borrowed a suitcase and had my extra clothes in it, and they told me when we got to boot camp that they would send it back, and so all I did was send back the borrowed suitcase and I gave my clothes to somebody else that was shipping his clothes back home, and I just didn't fool with it. Everything I had that was civilian, I give it to this kid and he filled up his suitcase with it and sent it to his mama.

Wow, that's something else.

J.R. Collins: But the strange thing about it is I reflect on my life, and I never asked permission to do things that affected my life, but I made wise decisions as a child even.

Seems like it turned out well, absolutely, yes sir. Well sir, I appreciate you taking the time to sit and talk to me today, and everybody at the Veteran's Land Board appreciates your service to our country, your time in the military, and you said you weren't there when any bombs were dropping or whatever, but just the fact that you served means a lot and we're very appreciative of that.

J.R. Collins: Well, you had to have those kind of people to keep the bombs from falling. We kept the ships from being sunk right there in front of us, and it was, oh, it's a lot better to keep it from happening than to go sink the sub after he sinks a ship.

Absolutely, yeah.

J.R. Collins: And I always felt like if you can have the quiet time with it, if you manage a situation that it's that way, that's the best way.

Absolutely. What is it, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?

J.R. Collins: Yeah, that's right, basically that's about it.

Yes sir, well I really appreciate it sir, and like I mentioned, we'll make copies of this interview that we will send to you that you can give to your family or friends or whomever, so probably next week sometime we'll get these burned onto CD's for you and send to you, and then if you have any pictures of any sort that you'd want us to put on our web site or in our archives, just give them to Ms. Huffman and she can scan and email those to us.

J.R. Collins: I have a picture of myself about boot camp time.

We'd love to have a copy of that.

J.R. Collins: That's hanging on the door and you can have a copy.

Yeah, Ms. Huffman I'm sure can scan a copy of that and send it to us, and I've got a camera here, too, so once we finish this interview I will snap a shot with my camera for today as well.

[End of recording]